UNITED NATIONS

EP

Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme

Distr.
GENERAL

UNEP/GC.20/9
2 November 1998

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Twentieth session
Nairobi, 1-5 February 1999
Item 4 (c) of the provisional agenda*

POLICY ISSUES

COORDINATION AND COOPERATION WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE UNITED NATIONS, INCLUDING NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Further improvement of the international response to environmental emergencies

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

A joint project on environmental emergencies is being carried out by UNEP and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). This integrated United Nations response capacity is bringing international assistance to countries facing various environmental emergencies. The implementation of this project demonstrates that the consolidation of experience and expertise between UNEP and OCHA is a practicable approach that makes the best use of limited resources. It provides a pragmatic, targeted and efficient structure, and fills identified gaps in the international coverage of environmental emergency response, without duplicating the work of other organizations.

Countries have at their disposal a practical stand-by system that is activated at any time, as required, to facilitate and/or mobilize international assistance in environmental emergencies. This integrated approach highlights the vital role for inter-agency cooperation to achieve positive results in this complex and important area.

* UNEP/GC.20/1.

K9800013 111198

/...

For reasons of economy, this document is printed in a limited number. Delegates are kindly requested to bring their copies to meetings and not to request additional copies.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

1. Take note of the progress made in implementing Council decision 19/9 E;

2. Express its satisfaction with and endorse the constructive collaboration between UNEP and OCHA in enhancing the ability of the United Nations to assist countries, particularly developing countries, affected by environmental emergencies;

3. Express its appreciation to OCHA for providing the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit with emergency facilities and office space;

4. Request the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit to further develop its activities and provide services in accordance with recommendations of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies;

5. Invite governments and relevant United Nations agencies, bodies and programmes to continue to cooperate with the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit in its efforts to provide assistance to countries, in particular developing countries, facing environmental emergencies;

6. Urge governments and international organizations in a position to do so to contribute to the Trust Fund for Environmental Emergencies;

7. Request the Executive Director to allocate the necessary resources for the biennium 2000-2001 for the administration and operation of the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit;

8. Further request the Executive Director to submit a progress report on the activities of the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit to the Council at its twenty-second session.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which is the United Nations body responsible for coordination of international disaster relief, is pursuing together with UNEP the consolidation of international environmental and humanitarian assistance. A Joint Environment Unit was established in 1994, in cooperation with the former United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), following extensive consultations with governments, which expressed a strong preference for a simple mechanism in the United Nations to expedite the delivery of international environmental assistance, including a single entry point to the system with regard to different disasters.

2. At its nineteenth session, the Governing Council adopted the Nairobi Declaration on the Role and Mandate of UNEP (decision 19/1). In it the Council identified as a core element of future activities efforts to "analyse the state of the global environment and assess global and regional environmental trends, provide policy advice, early warning information on environmental threats, and to catalyse and promote international cooperation

and action, based on the best scientific and technical capabilities available". In decision 19/9 E, the Council expressed its satisfaction with the continued collaboration between UNEP and DHA, and invited governments and relevant United Nations organizations to continue to cooperate with the Joint Environment Unit in its efforts to provide assistance to countries facing environmental emergencies. The Council also extended the life of the Unit for a further two years - 1998 and 1999. Subsequently, at its fifth special session, the Council identified the issue of early warning and environmental emergency response as an area of concentration of UNEP's activities.

3. The Joint Environment Unit has been mandated to improve the international response to ecological disasters by acting as a broker between affected and donating countries, a clearing-house for information and a switchboard for disaster notification and alert. The Joint Environment Unit is available for urgent assistance 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It provides services through worldwide contacts, including arrangements for impartial and independent assessments of emergencies. Taking into account rapid industrial development in different regions, governments of developing countries and countries with economies in transition are major beneficiaries of this project. The joint initiative on environmental emergencies aims at improving and complementing the existing international response capacity to help countries in coping with different disasters.

The issue to be addressed

4. There is increasing evidence that industrialization in the developing world carries with it a significant risk of humanitarian and environmental disasters, whether caused by man or nature. In particular, the accidental release of large quantities of substances that pose a threat to the natural environment is the subject of growing concern to the world community. Despite many efforts to reduce such releases, accidents will continue to occur in the foreseeable future and an ever growing amount of attention is being paid to the need for faster and better response capabilities. Environmental emergencies are increasing in both frequency and magnitude as industry and chemical use are expanding in developing countries. Combinations of natural and technological emergencies are also growing. Many governments have not yet developed the infrastructure to cope with such disasters.

The Joint Unit's mission

5. The Joint Unit is aiming at the mobilization and coordination of urgent international assistance in various environmental emergencies.

Strategy

6. The Joint Unit is responsible for the provision of practical assistance to countries, in particular developing countries, affected by environmental disasters, such as chemical and oil spills, industrial/technological accidents, forest fires and other sudden-onset emergencies that cause, or threaten, environmental damage and can have a serious impact on human health

and welfare. This programme is implemented through permanent monitoring of emergencies, prompt notification to the international community, brokerage of bilateral assistance, swift mobilization of multilateral assistance and emergency assessments. Closer attention is being paid to the environmental impact of natural disasters.

Integration in OCHA

7. The Joint Unit is staffed and financed by UNEP, and is organizationally fully integrated in the Disaster Response Branch (DRB) of OCHA in Geneva. The Unit is small, consisting at present of one Professional staff member (P-5) and one secretary (G-4). DRB provides essential operational and administrative support. It puts at the Unit's disposal its emergency response facilities and mechanisms, including the 24-hour-a-day duty system, and the necessary office space. The Joint Unit dovetails its activities with the services traditionally provided by the Disaster Response Branch, including arrangements for the independent assessment of emergencies upon governmental request. The Unit stays in close touch with the Regional Desks of DRB, which are responsible for the mobilization of assistance in the event of natural disasters. Under these arrangements, UNEP has substantive responsibility with regard to environmental aspects. This practical integration has allowed the United Nations to save money and avoid creating another administrative structure.

II. PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE

8. The focus of the Joint Unit's activities is the mobilization of international environmental assistance and provision of initial assessment and post-emergency analysis upon governmental request. Since its establishment, the Unit has assisted many countries in responding to a variety of environmental emergencies, including Albania, Barbados, Chile, Djibouti, Ecuador, Guyana, Montenegro, Mozambique, the Philippines, Romania, the Russian Federation, Rwanda, Seychelles, Slovenia, Turkey, Ukraine and the United Republic of Tanzania.

9. Often, countries turn to the Joint Unit for assistance when there is a conflict of interests, and an independent assessment of the situation and advice are required. This is a typical service of the Unit, which guarantees that United Nations missions sent to accident sites, and expertise provided, are totally independent and impartial.

10. During the recent past, the Joint Unit responded to requests for assistance, in particular, from Armenia and Georgia (threat of two major dam breaks), Brazil (forest fires), Chile (acute river pollution), Kyrgyzstan (toxic chemical spill), Madagascar (chemical fire), Paraguay (storage of hazardous wastes), the Republic of Moldova (severe underground water pollution), Somalia (alleged dumping of hazardous substances) and the United Republic of Tanzania (bush fire).

11. The Joint Unit provided or facilitated different types of assistance, depending on specific situations and national requests. For example, in the cases of Armenia, Brazil, Chile, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Somalia and the United Republic of Tanzania, expert assessment missions were arranged

or facilitated. The missions assessed situations and produced conclusions and recommendations, which were shared with the national authorities, relevant United Nations agencies and other international organizations, and potential donors. In Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar and Paraguay, the Joint Unit maintained a swift flow of information between the affected countries, national experts, donor National Focal Points and relevant UNEP units and international partners. The Unit has also facilitated professional response advice. Further international assistance to the affected countries was mobilized, as required, depending on the impact of disasters and national needs.

12. The most recent example of extensive joint operations was the provision of assistance to Indonesia and the Russian Federation in connection with extensive forest fires. The Joint Unit and the Disaster Response Branch's Regional Desks closely monitored the situation and stayed in close contact with the national authorities. OCHA, in close cooperation with UNEP, urgently dispatched United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams to Indonesia and the Russian Federation. The teams were tasked to ensure close links between national and international relief efforts, and assess priority needs for international assistance. The UNDAC teams worked in close cooperation with the competent national authorities, the donor community, United Nations agencies and relevant international organizations. The Joint Unit prepared and disseminated a number of situation reports on these disasters.

13. As a result of efforts undertaken to mobilize international assistance in 1997 and 1998, many countries have provided different types of help, both in cash and in kind, to Indonesia. At the time of writing this report, the Joint Environment Unit is mobilizing assistance to deal with the Russian forest fire disaster.

Support activities

14. To improve the delivery of environmental emergency services to governments upon request, the Joint Unit has been further developing core response services, including brokerage and information clearing-house functions, and the facilitation of initial assessment and post-emergency analysis. It has also implemented a number of support activities.

15. The Joint Unit has established a global network of officially designated National Focal Points (NFPs) as conduits for information and assistance. This enables the Unit to maintain efficient links between potential recipient and donor countries. The network has been considerably expanded, and covers at present more than 100 countries in all regions.

16. Swift preparation and wide distribution of standard situation reports among relevant actors has made it possible to establish a flow of uniform information on disasters and their environmental consequences. To improve emergency reporting procedures, a standard notification/request for assistance has been elaborated and disseminated among National Focal Points and UNDP Resident Representatives in all countries. The form is now being used in different emergency situations.

17. Guidelines and a questionnaire for environmental assessment following chemical emergencies have been elaborated, as a possible emergency assessment tool, to enable the competent national authorities and/or international experts to gather the necessary data on-site for onward transmission to the Joint Unit. Guidelines for the development of national environmental contingency plans have been prepared in cooperation with the UNEP Industry and Environment Office. 1/ The purpose of these guidelines is to assist countries considering the elaboration of such plans at the national level.

18. Updating of the 1991 International Directory of Emergency Response Centres has been initiated by the Unit, jointly with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the UNEP Industry and Environment Office. 1/ The new directory will also be published in electronic form.

19. A discussion document entitled "Practical considerations for developing national environmental emergency response mechanisms" has been prepared. The primary purpose of this document is to offer practical suggestions for countries that wish to improve their response to environmental emergencies.

International Advisory Group

20. UNEP and OCHA have set up an open-ended international Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies to bring together national experts and focal points from countries around the world. The Advisory Group meets periodically to share experience in the field of response to environmental disasters, review the work of the Joint Unit and provide advice and guidance on its future activities.

Linkages and coordination

21. The Joint Unit has increased collaboration with other UNEP units and programmes dealing with prevention and preparedness aspects of environmental emergencies and other disaster-related matters. This activity, which closely relates to a number of UNEP's subprogrammes, especially in areas such as early warning, environmental assessment, chemicals, industry and environment, and trade and environment, is being implemented in cooperation with relevant UNEP units, convention secretariats and all regional offices.

22. The Joint Unit has continued developing cooperation with many partners both inside and outside the United Nations system. Practical interface procedures have already been prepared and agreed upon with a number of international organizations and UNEP organizational units. The development and implementation of interface procedures with other cooperating bodies will help to consolidate responsibilities between agencies sharing similar interests in environmental disaster response, ensuring that in an emergency all parties are aware of the situation, what assistance is requested, and what is actually provided.

1/ Now part of the Division of Technology, Industry and Environment.

III. FINANCIAL ASPECTS

23. The Joint Environment Unit is financed by UNEP, which allocates resources from its Environment Fund on an annual basis. UNEP has released the necessary financial resources to the Unit for 1998. In addition to the salaries of two staff members (a P-5 and a G-4), a limited amount of money has been made available for basic activities. The possibility of unfreezing a Professional post (P-3) within the Unit has been favourably considered by UNEP and it is hoped that an additional staff member will be on board in the near future.

24. Bearing in mind that the Unit is operating under difficult financial conditions and with minimal staff, a Trust Fund for Environmental Emergencies has been formally established by UNEP to support the implementation of this project. Fund-raising activities have not yet been started.

25. Annual budgetary requirements for the future activities of the Unit are estimated at around US$ 560,000.

IV. FUTURE ACTIVITIES

26. Keeping in mind that all major elements of the created system require permanent maintenance and further improvement, the Joint Environment Unit will consolidate this practical project in order to strengthen the international capacity to respond to environmental emergencies. It will continue to focus on practical assistance to countries facing disasters with environmental consequences, taking into account the recommendations of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies.

27. The Unit will further improve the delivery of environmental emergency services to governments upon request. In particular, it will continue to arrange advisory missions to assess the extent of environmental damage, design remedial measures and coordinate international assistance. Links with potential recipient and donor countries will be maintained and strengthened through the global network of National Focal Points, which will be further expanded. The Unit will continue to develop cooperation with many partners, both inside and outside the United Nations system. The existing interface procedures prepared and agreed upon with a number of international organizations will be further tested and fine-tuned, while similar mechanisms will be developed with other partners.

28. In accordance with a decision taken by the Governing Council at its fifth special session, which identified the issue of early warning and environmental emergency response as an area of concentration of UNEP's activities, the Joint Environment Unit will further develop its close collaboration with GRID, on the basis of the existing interface procedures, as well as with other relevant divisions, in order to make full use of the monitoring, assessment and early warning capabilities of UNEP.

29. The threat of environmental emergencies is becoming ever greater, especially in developing States and countries with economies in transition. The Joint Environment Unit will consider the feasibility of setting up a special stand-by team of emergency experts who could be immediately mobilized

for the provision of urgent environmental assistance. The Unit will also explore the possibility of elaborating appropriate legal instruments to improve early notification and mutual assistance in the case of ecological disasters such as forest fires, chemical accidents and other types of man-made emergency.

30. A major output of this project should be the improved, better-structured and better-coordinated delivery of environmental emergency services to the international community. The following main results are expected from further implementation of this project:

(a) An effective and consolidated international response to environmental emergencies;

(b) The rapid and efficient mobilization and coordination of the international response to environmental aspects of natural disasters and emergencies;

(c) Efficient brokerage functions, including a system of arrangements with donor countries concerning the provision of personnel, equipment and other resources;

(d) Better support to national authorities in responding to environmental emergencies;

(e) Enhancement of the joint UNEP/OCHA emergency response capacity.